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Holy Spirit Power

Acts 8:26-40

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This is going to be an age-dated question, but how many of you remember a program called Key 73? We were supposed to get together with other denominations and churches all across America and bring one million people to Jesus Christ that year. Key 73 was the program-du-jour, the new program or technique of that day that was going to mobilize all of us to get out and do what we knew we were supposed to do anyway and talk about Jesus and convince people to come to Him in personal faith. Now, I don't want to be too cynical, but there have been quite a few Key 73 clones since Key 73, and there were probably quite a few before Key 73 that I don't remember.

I confess that a sort of fatigue sets in. One becomes weary and wary of these promised fixes to the decline of our denominational churches. I have been struck in recent months with the distinction between the two phrases: "Let's do a work for God" and "Let's do a work of God." Yet, as a pastor who went to seminary in the last half of the 20th century, I have been trained to think in terms of programs as the root of success in the church. And I have been trained to be the pastor of a medium to large scale congregation that has as a core value the not-very-biblical notion of catering to the desire of the congregation.

You may not be aware of it (and if you are not, I suspect it proves my point) but CPC no longer has an evangelism committee. We haven't had one for about two years now. We don't have one because we weren't doing any evangelism. When I came to CPC over five years ago, I remember a meeting with the evangelism committee of that day in which I heard one lone elder challenge the committee to begin plans to get the congregation to do some door-to-door evangelism. There was a dead silence. I remember another meeting in which I challenged that same committee to do some creative evangelism toward reaching for Christ some of the Mormons in our community who, by the way, spend a great deal of money supporting teams of young people who spend an enormous amount of time going door-to-door in Vacaville trying to reach people for Joseph Smith. Again, there was a dead silence, though in fairness this silence was accompanied by a gasp or two in which people wondered why I would want them to offend their Mormon friends by sharing with them the very good news of the Gospel so that they didn't continue on their path straight to hell.

In addition to not wanting to do any personal faith-sharing, the evangelism committees were also reluctant to get involved with the various large-scale evangelistic programs (like Key 73) that come along every year or so, though there was some interest in the one by a German guy named Bonnke that would have a slick, glossy, direct mail campaign go out to all the households in America, and people would, you know, read the slick, glossy, picture laded stuff and say, wow, I need to run to the nearest church and accept Jesus as savior and lord and get involved.

So, you see, I've become a bit jaded when it comes to evangelism done the traditional, program way. Which leads us to the scripture of the day which, watch out now!, is involved with evangelism done the old fashioned way, one-on-one. Today's lesson from Acts is an evangelistic story, a story about good news, the good news of Christ coming to someone. But it is not evangelism without some cost, some pain.

The story begins with Philip who is told to arise and go, of all places, to the middle of the desert at, of all times, noon. He isn't told why. But let me just point out two items: He isn't told why, that is, it's not his idea; he is called, he is told to go there, that's the first item. The second item is that he is sufficiently God's person that he is already listening to what God might say to him.

There, in the desert, Philip meets a strange traveler, an Ethiopian, a member of the court of the Queen of the Ethiopians, a man likely of another race, of exotic nationality. He's somehow got a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, perhaps Jesus' favorite prophet, though the Ethiopian doesn't know that. He has trouble making sense of something that he is reading, somethng about a lamb being led to his death.

Because Philip is a Jew, the Ethiopian asks him about the scroll. Because Philip is who he is, who God has led him to be, and because of how Philip has decided to submit himself to God, Philip is able to help guide the reading of the Ethiopian. The Ethiopian gets his questions answered and sees the larger commitment that lies before him, and moves to accept Christ as savior and lord. He even wants to make a public confession of his new faith by being baptized, but Philip says there is no water around.

Philip is at this point perhaps glad there is no water around. After all, what are the rules of the church on baptizing Ethiopians? On baptizing eunuchs? On baptizing borderline Jews? Ah, the wonders of complexity. But wait! They come upon some water (in the desert). One imagines Philip pauses, sighs a bit, and then baptizes this man from the margins. And one more human being discovers the joy of Jesus.

Which brings us back to how we got out here in the desert in the first place. For this surprising, stunning act of evangelism wasn't Philip's idea, nor was it his church's idea. It didn't come from denominational headquarters and it didn't come with curriculum and material. Philip got dragged kicking and screaming out here to, of all places, the desert to minister to, of all people, this Ethiopian. Who's idea was it? It was the Holy Spirit's idea!

This story is found in the Book of Acts. It's formally called the 'Acts of the Apostles.' But that's not the name it should have - it should be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. The apostles and disciples do plenty of action in this Book of Acts, the story of the first days of the church. But most of their action is reaction ------ the action in the story is from the Holy Spirit! Every major move that the church or the leaders of the church make in the Book of Acts is usually initiated, prodded by the Holy Spirit.

The image given here of the Holy Spirit is that of a power that prods the church (in the person of Philip) to move out, to reach out. Evangelism is God's idea before it's our idea.

Some people complain that a church can begin to take on the characteristics of a country club, and it can be true. That path is all to easy to follow. Just set up programs that please people, and that appear to be doing things 'for' God. Pretty soon you'll have a church full of vested interests in this or that … but the last thing people will want to do is share their faith.

Martin Luther once claimed that he led the Protestant Reformation by sitting in a tavern drinking good beer and minding his own business. The Holy Spirit did the rest. But the real truth is that Luther was God's person, just like Philip and even just like Jonah. God's people spend time with God and seek His face in prayer and in reflection upon His Word. Thus, God's people are ready and able to hear God's vision when it comes; they are able to hear the call of the Holy Spirit when it comes, the call to witness to what we know to be true, to the people that God will put into our path.

I said the same thing last Fall. If you don't want a certain kind of people to come to our church, or if you want us to become an effective country club that successfully caters to your program needs, then by all means DO NOT spend time with God in prayer and DO NOT spend time in His Word. Because if you do spend regular time in prayer and if you do spend time in His Word, I assure you, the Holy Spirit *will* bring you to the place where you will have the opportunity and the means to be Philip, to explain the Gospel, to bring someone to Jesus Christ.

And that won't come about because of the most recent Key 73. And that won't be a work we do 'for' God. That *will* be a work 'of' God because it will be 'Holy Spirit power' that moves us to speak to this or that person because we're paying attention to the Holy Spirit daily. And it will be a work 'of' God because our motivation won't be obligation or program compliance but a sharing of what we have gleaned about God from daily reflection in God's Word.

Trust me. This is how it works. It's really pretty simple. Spend time with God in prayer and spend time with God in reflection in His Word, and God will place into your path an Ethiopian.

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